
H-France Review Vol. 5 (January 2005), No. 4

Charles J. Esdaile, *Fighting Napoleon: Guerrillas, Bandits and Adventurers in Spain, 1808-1814*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004. xi + 272 pp. Map, illustrations, table of abbreviations, notes, glossary, bibliography, and index. \$40.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-300-10112-0.

Review by Owen Connelly, University of South Carolina.

Charles Esdaile has written a convincing revisionist book on the guerrillas and ordinary (and extraordinary) people who carried on an irregular war against Napoleon's troops during the Peninsular War, 1808-13 (*Guerre d'Espagne*, for the French; *Guerra de la Independencia* for the Spanish). His main purposes are to present a more realistic view of *La Guerrilla* and its membership, and to refute the traditional view that Spanish resistance to the French, which began as a grass roots uprising in 1808, was continued relentlessly throughout the war and that it was carried on, when Spanish armies failed, by guerrillas and ordinary citizens. This myth had an impact on anti-Napoleonic peoples and governments in northern Europe, despite the fact that many of the Spanish supported, or were employed by King Joseph Bonaparte, who, however, was never able to raise a Spanish army.

The work is supported heavily by archival documents: In Madrid, from the *Archivo del Congreso de Diputados*, *Archivo histórico Nacional*, the *Real Academia de Historia*, the *Servicio Historico Militar*, the *Biblioteca Nacional* and *del Senado*. Elsewhere, from the *Archivo General de Simancas*, *Archivo de la Corona de Aragón*, Barcelona; the *Biblioteca de la Universidad de Zaragoza*; *Archivo Municipal de Tudela* and *de Zaragoza*; the *Real Colegio de San Albano*, Valladolid; the British Library, London; the Public Record Office, Kew; and the University of Southampton. He does not use French archival sources, but he lists a spate of printed primary sources, including the *Mémoires et Correspondance . . . du roi Joseph* (Paris, 1853-54), Spanish and English printed sources and secondary works in English, Spanish and French.

Esdaile's objection to traditional accounts of the war, and in particular to the image of the guerrillas, is that they were written with scant reference to Spanish archival sources (while admitting that Spain's archives are more difficult to access than the French). He does not hesitate to criticize the "greats": Sir Charles Oman, whose multi-volume *Peninsular War* (London, 1902-30) has been a standard for ninety years, but Esdaile says that he was interested mainly in Wellington's campaigns, and, on the guerrillas, consulted primarily the published works of the Conde de Toreño (a contemporary, and member of the rebel Cortez) and José Gómez de Arce, a late nineteenth-century historian (p. 2). For David Chandler, whose *Campaigns of Napoleon* (NY, 1966) is highly regarded by military historians, the French were defeated by Wellington and independent guerrilla bands (p. 15). He says Gabriel Lovett's *Napoleon and the Birth of Modern Spain* stated the traditional view: "When we think of the Spanish guerrillas of 1808-1813, we have in mind . . . bands of men that arose . . . under the leadership of fearless civilians who settled accounts with Napoleon's armies in their own manner" (p. 195). He might have added Jean Tulard, the doyen of French Napoleonists. [1]

El Empecinado, Espoz y Mina, and others were made legends by British and Spanish historians, and latterly by Americans. Esdaile's Spanish targets are Arce and Muñoz Maldonado, although he credits the latter with identifying the guerrillas who harassed Dupont before the Battle of Bailén as regular troops, or led by regular officers (pp. 19-22). In sum, he says, a myth has been perpetuated of dashing, civilian-cum-guerrilla fighters, cutting down isolated Frenchmen and French units, and keeping the French in continual fear and anxiety, in the name of king and church.

But if not valiant patriots, who were the guerrillas? Apparently, they began, as popular legend has held, as small groups, led by civilian patriots or army officers looking for a better way to defeat the French than head-on battle. However, the bands changed rapidly. After Espoz y Mina's band was almost annihilated at Rioja in 1810, he put his troops in uniform and trained them to fight as regulars; by 1811 he had two regiments of infantry and one of cavalry, with artillery supplied by the British. In 1813, he had nine regiments of infantry and one of cavalry; the infantry in brown, with rope shoes and round hats; the cavalry outfitted as hussars. They proved effective, especially at Vitoria (1813) under Wellington.

Esdaile questions the motives of the guerrilla chiefs. Even Espoz y Mina, he says, was hardly a pure patriot, but lusted for power and profit. He may have played a part in the capture of Martin Javier Mina, whose name he took, so as to succeed him and take leadership of the irregulars in Navarre (pp. 91-96). Other groups under prominent leaders also grew. Juan Diaz Porlier integrated his guerrillas with Loredó militia regiments and several regular army units assigned to him (p. 49, p. 189). Some guerrilla units were regular from the start. Francisco Ballesteros, a regular army general, began with a few regiments of regulars, and grew to several divisions, striking at the French and retreating into British Gibraltar. Overall, some units of *La Guerrilla* comprised traditional bands (*partidas*), some *partidas* and regulars, some local militia, *partidas*, and regulars. Some *partidas* were merely bandits; banditry, already rife because of economic conditions, at least doubled after the arrival of French (pp. 198-199). Other bands were made up of deserters and volunteers (usually fleeing the boredom of peasant life or to find food and regular pay). Deserters were from the Spanish armies, or the French—principally Spanish who had served Joseph Bonaparte—who often left for lack of pay (p. 113).

In addition, the Spanish armies detached regulars. Don Joaquin Blake sent Pedro Villacampa, who professed to be a guerrilla, to harass the French with regulars and volunteers. In addition, regular troops, under Julian Sanchez and Felipe Perena operated in Aragon and Leon. The British supplied arms, ammunition, and supplies. Wellington's forces also got into the guerrilla act by sending out raiding parties. There was help from the Royal Navy, which carried troops from La Coruña and Cadiz to points near their objectives, and sometimes did more. Sir Home Riggs Popham staged amphibious raids in the summer of 1812 with a squadron of naval vessels carrying two battalions of Marines. His marines went ashore and operated with the Guerrilla chiefs along the Biscay coast, striking French garrisons and leaving before reinforcing columns could arrive. They pinned down the French Army of the North at a critical time (Napoleon was invading Russia), and captured and held Santander. However, Esdaile concludes that the guerrillas were at best a secondary factor in Allied victory in Spain (p. 195).

Further, his evidence shows that the formation of *partidas*, and their conversion into regular troops, was encouraged by Spanish officialdom, including the rebel Cortez, in order to bring an out-of-control people back under their authority (p. 198). Thus Guerrillas were not formed in an upsurge against the French, but were an artificial creation—the work of those favoring the preservation of the old regime and/or individuals with a stake in preserving the ancien regime locally. (Of 371 *partida* leaders identified only 37 were of the common people (p. 93).) They were also unpopular in the areas where they operated. “Far from living amongst the populace, the guerrillas lived off it . . .” (p. 200, p. 128).

As to the population as a whole, Esdaile finds that, generally the zeal of the Spanish disappeared after 1808, and that it had been based on local situations where the French invasion posed some immediate threat. For example, Guerrillas and volunteers were easy to recruit in Navarre and the Basque Provinces because many people owned their own land and homes, and were determined to defend their property. In other cases French atrocities provoked individuals or whole towns to fight.

As to war for church and king by commoners, Esdaile cites the poor economic conditions under the Bourbons, which had reduced both city workers and peasants to abject poverty, and the tyranny of the church and the landholders. In addition, a social war was in progress: Peasants against landholders. The real objective of most peasants, says Esdaile, was to escape the authority of church, state, and *señor* (p. 69). After 1808, he says, “on all sides there was nothing to be seen but draft evasion, desertion, and anti-conscription riots” (p. 196). The draft (*Sorteo* or *Quinta*), imposed by the rebel Cortez, was a relic of the past regime as it targeted the poor and helpless. Exemptions were automatic for nobles, clergy, married men, students, professionals of all sorts, university graduates, officials of any rank, persons necessary to the economy, and more. Substitutes could be bought. Rich men, who had made “patriotic” contributions, were exempt, as were their sons, usually. Some escaped service by joining “Guerrilla bands” in localities far from any French military units. The upper classes formed “distinguished volunteers,” whose members avoided the draft and protected property (p. 75). Marriage or self-mutilation to escape the draft were common practices (pp. 80-81). “[P]atriotism ... was notable by its absence” (p. 198).

Esdaile concludes that “resistance to Napoleon ... ushered in a new age,” but only mildly politicized the masses. He repeats the assertion that the Spanish people failed to rise against Napoleon, which left the war to the guerrillas and Spanish armies (often the same, or combined), and the British and Portuguese. What he wants historians to accept is that Spanish guerrillas were not the “freedom fighters of legend.” but a complex phenomenon “whose military impact has been greatly exaggerated” (p. 204). In this I could not agree more. Future historians of Napoleon’s “Spanish Affair” will have to begin with this book and Esdaile’s *Peninsular War* (2002). Further, Charles Esdaile has undertaken for his specialty what is a general flaw in the history of Napoleon’s campaigns, namely, the failure to use non-French archival sources. Until historians explore every campaign using all possible sources, we will not have a valid history of the Napoleonic Wars, but will keep repeating the same stories, accurate or not.

NOTES

[1] See for example, Jean Tulard, *Napoléon ou le mythe du sauveur* (Paris: Fayard, 1977), pp. 341-2.

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